

## HOW THE AFFAIR ENDS (BONUS CHAPTER) BY WINTER K. WILLIS

Blinking, I stare up at the wooden beams of the ceiling above. Where am I? Panic sets in as I try to sit up, but a sharp pain shoots through my side, causing me to gasp and fall back against the coarse pillow beneath my head. I feel bandages wrapped around my torso. What happened?

I try to remember, but my mind is a foggy void. I can't recall my name, let alone why I'm in this unknown place. My hands tremble slightly, and I clasp them together to steady them.

The room is dimly lit, walls made of timber and adorned with animal pelts. The distinct smell of burning wood fills the air, and I realize there's a fireplace off to the side, the orange embers glowing warmly.

A door creaks, and a man steps in. He's older, with a scruffy beard and eyes that have seen too much. His clothes are simple, worn down by time and the elements. A tin hat rests on his head, and he clutches a stack of papers in one hand.

"Ah, you're awake," he says, his voice gravelly. "Wasn't sure you'd make it for a while there."

I lick my dry lips. "Who... Who are you? Where am I?"

The man chuckles, "Name's Elias. And you're in my cabin. Found you by the side of the road. Looked like you'd been in quite the accident."

I frown, struggling to piece things together. "I can't remember anything."

Elias nods, sitting down on a stool next to my bed. "Figured as much. Amnesia can be a tricky thing."

"Why am I here? And not in a hospital?"

He gives me a wary glance. "Hospitals? Can't trust 'em. They're part of the grid, part of the system. They're always watching, always listening."

I raise an eyebrow, confused. "Who?"

Elias leans in closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "The government, the corporations. They track you, control you. They've got their tentacles in everything."

While his words seem like the ramblings of a conspiracy theorist, his eyes are sincere, filled with genuine concern. Maybe there's truth to his words, or perhaps the trauma has caused me to become more gullible.

"You were alone when I found you," Elias continues, "No ID, nothing. But I figured you might want these." He hands over the stack of papers he was holding.

I take them, squinting in the dim light. They're letters, addressed to me. But the name at the top slips through my grasp, just out of reach.

"Do you know my name?" I ask, my voice shaky. Elias shrugs, "Just found the letters in your pocket. Figured they might help jog your memory."

Skimming through the pages, I see mentions of shared moments, dreams, and a love that was deep and true. But the name that keeps appearing, like a beacon in the dark, is "Marissa."

"Marissa," I murmur, the name tasting familiar on my lips.

Elias watches me carefully, "You remember something?"

I close my eyes, trying to reach past the fog. A fleeting image of a woman with dark hair and bright eyes comes to mind. My heart aches at the thought of her.

"Marissa," I say again, more certain this time. "I need to find Marissa."

Elias nods, understanding flashing in his eyes. "Well, first things first. We need to get you back on your feet. And then, if Marissa's out there, we'll find her."